

**HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS NETWORK (HCHN)
PUBLIC HEALTH – SEATTLE & KING COUNTY**

Bedbugs are Back!

*By Heather Barr, RN
and Kate Bracy Kalb, ARNP*

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Bedbugs are back, and they are here in Seattle. In fact, a few sites serving homeless populations have reported bed bugs on the premises in the past few months. Put them on your radar screen!

These little pests had pretty much disappeared from the United States, but now we are surprised to see them infesting hotels, dormitories and homes. They are not restricted to low-rent apartments or filthy quarters, but seem to be finding their way to luxury hotels and high-end residences as well.

The common bedbug (*cimex lectularius*) is about the size of an apple seed. They live by feeding on humans, usually at night. When they bite and extract blood, they inject a blood thinner that also makes the bite

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Is Someone Coughing? Think TB!

By Marcia Stone, RN

“Many homeless people have been exposed to TB and have not been evaluated or treated.”

Finding tuberculosis early can save lives and prevent the disease from spreading. This is especially true in group settings like shelters, and for people whose immune systems may be weakened. Alert shelter and agency staff are key players in the prevention of any communicable disease. Staff often get to know clients over a long period of time and notice subtle changes in the client's health. The best option for a person with symptoms is to be checked out at a clinic where s/he can then get primary care. Sometimes, though, even with a lot of support, clients find it difficult to seek evaluation and treatment.

If a person has had a cough for more than three weeks and has at least

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Pandemic Flu and Vulnerable Populations

By Janna Wilson

If a pandemic flu hits Seattle, what happens to vulnerable individuals such as homeless people? As part of its work to prepare our community for pandemic influenza, Public Health—Seattle & King County has formed a “Vulnerable Populations Action Team” (VPAT). The purpose of VPAT is to assure that pandemic flu planning takes into account the needs of King County’s most vulnerable and hard-to-reach residents. These are people who would need extra support prior to and throughout a pandemic, and include people experiencing homelessness.

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Under VPAT, a work group formed in September 2006 to develop a planning guide tailored for agencies working with homeless people. The group includes representatives of homeless service organizations, clinics that work with homeless people, public health staff, and others.

The group is meeting four times in September-October 2006 to discuss special issues and concerns about pandemic flu and homelessness, and to promote coordination with other pandemic flu planning work that is taking place for the broader community. The work group will develop a short planning guide that will help homeless shelters, day programs, and housing sites better prepare for and respond to pandemic influenza. The document will be distributed to agencies later this fall. The planning guide is just one activity in what will be a fuller body of work—still in the development stage—to assure that the needs of homeless people are taken into account in pandemic flu planning.

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painless. This allows them to take plenty of blood without being detected. They live in cracks and crevices and are most common in high turnover places such as hotels, dormitories and shelters. They hitch rides to new locations by stowing away in luggage, clothing or furniture, and they can go up to a year without a feeding, so they can hide out for a long, long time.



Bedbugs look like this. They are brown or red, flat, and about the size of an apple seed.

Jack Plankenhorn, service manager for Eastside Exterminators, says, “I’ve never seen this many cases of bedbugs in all my years combined as I’ve seen this year.” Plankenhorn says that his business receives about five calls a week, when in the past that might be the total for a year. Several years ago they were not getting calls at all for bedbugs. He blames international travel and importing items like furniture for the recent upsurge. He also points out that we’ve gone to “baiting” to rid homes and apartments of pests. “Baiting is great because you can target specific pests, and use less toxic chemicals. But when we don’t use the liquids, we don’t get rid of other things, like bedbugs, in the process.”

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What to do if you think a client has bedbug bites:

- Try to find out whether there are bedbugs where they are sleeping
- Advise them not to scratch and spread the infection
- If the bites look infected, get them some medical care so they can be treated
- If you have questions, call Heather Barr with Health Care for the Homeless at 206.296.4599

Getting rid of bedbugs is hard. They love cracks, crevices and crannies like mattress bindings. They come out at night, when body heat and carbon monoxide tell them there are humans available to bite. Unlike lice, they do not live on people, so you may not spot them unless you inspect sleeping areas.

The “good” news is that bedbugs have never been shown to carry disease from one person to another, so they do not cause diseases to spread. But the bites are itchy and uncomfortable, and can become infected if they are scratched.

If you think you have bedbugs, here are some things you can do:

- Look in wall cracks and mattress creases for the bugs themselves or a brownish/reddish stain.
- Clean out the area really well if you are trying to treat it for bedbugs. Don’t leave places for them to hide.
- Call a good pest control company that has experience with bedbugs. Some of them will give you advice on the phone about chemicals you can use.
- If you hire a company, be sure the contract covers several applications.
- After the room or area is treated, wash the bedding in hot water and dry it in the dryer on high. Vacuum the area really well, and clean and vacuum the area often.
- Zip the mattress into a plastic cover.

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one other symptom of TB, **THINK TB!!!**

Other red flags for TB are if the person:

- comes from a country where TB is poorly controlled,
- has HIV infection
- has other medical conditions that affect the immune system
- has had recent contact with active TB disease.

Discussing a client’s case in a staff meeting may reveal other information that will be helpful in getting assistance for the person. It is helpful if you can find out where the person spends time during the day, and whether they have a case manager with another agency. That information will help with contact investigation and in getting the client care.

Many homeless people have been exposed to TB over the last several years and have not been evaluated or treated. If you have ANY questions or concerns about TB, or are having trouble getting a client evaluated, please call public health nurse Marcia Stone at 206.296.4730. She will help you make a plan and find resources to assist your client. Don't wait! Better to call early than wait until it's too late!

Symptoms of TB are:

- *Persistent cough for 3 weeks or more*
- *Coughing up blood*
- *Weight loss, loss of appetite, clothes getting loose*
- *Fatigue*
- *Fever*
- *Night sweats*

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Homeless service agencies can and should begin their own agency-level planning now. For more information and tools to help you get started, visit the Public Health-Seattle & King County website at: <http://www.metrokc.gov/health/pandemicflu/index.htm>



Flu Season is Here – Are You Ready?

By Kate Bracy Kalb, ARNP

It's flu season again and time to think about flu shots and ways to limit the spread of germs. According to Department of Health Disease Prevention staff, there should be plenty of flu vaccine for everyone this year. Supplies will be coming in in batches, beginning in early November.

Here are some ways to limit the spread of flu in your facility:

- Cover sneezes and coughs with tissues. If no tissue, don't cough into bare hands - cough into your inner elbow. Provide plenty of tissues and masks, and plastic-lined wastebaskets to deposit used tissues.
- Post "Cover Your Cough and Wash Your Hands" signs - Available FREE in English and Spanish by calling Heather Barr (206) 296-4599.
- Wash hands or use an alcohol-based hand gel

frequently: after riding public transportation, upon entering the program, after shaking hands, before eating, after using the toilet, and after changing diapers.

- Do your best not to touch your eyes, nose, or mouth, keeping your hands off your face.
- Talk about these measures at staff meetings and client/tenant gatherings. *Don't forget to share this information with your volunteers, including those working in nighttime "overflow" shelters.*
- Examine your facility's options for isolating people with the flu - take any reasonable steps you can to keep those with the flu isolated from those who are well.
- Increase housekeeping in high-use areas: bathrooms, common areas, doorknobs, surfaces, etc.

Health Care for the Homeless can provide you with free "Cover Your Cough" posters in English and Spanish. We also have some supplies of tissues and alcohol-based hand gel for those organizations that cannot afford to buy them.

For these supplies, or to see if your agency meets criteria for a flu shot clinic, call **Heather Barr, HCHN Public Health Nurse, at (206) 296-4599.**

For the latest on flu in King County, go to http://www.metrokc.gov/health/immunization/flu_season.htm



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